



'Short Eyes' a prison drama on adapting to society

Written in Sing Sing for a prison theater project

An escort leads past grim guards and through a barred gate into the prisoners' entrance. The set of the tiny theater is spray-painted institutional gray with a dark, dingy overlay of uncleanness. The house lights dim and the prisoners' roll call is heard from behind the set.

A capacity crowd showed up Thursday for the University Theatre's "Second Season" opening of "Short Eyes," an exhilarating, hot-wired piece of prison realism. Miguel Pinero was serving five years in Sing Sing when he wrote the play for a prison theater project. It won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award — the only "first play" so honored.

Cast under the firm direction of Mark Kuntz, the inmates belt out their lines with intelligence and emotion. A missed beat is rare.

Not so for the hearts of the audience. This is a violent, confrontational play, and it hap-

pens almost in your lap. The precisely timed action pushes hard and fast.

"This thing's got to be as ugly as we can make it," Kuntz told his actors during rehearsals. The play is about surviving, about how men adapt and why some don't. But subtlety and laughter bring respite from the heavy theme and densely packed dramatic action.

From the first scene, the prisoners with their scruffy clothes and tattoos (costumes by Jerry Williams) come off as incapable of dullness. Kamden Sisco, as the effeminate Cupcakes, rocks out up on a table to a jazzy number with witty jive-talk accompanied by a trash-can-bongo beat that shows off the versatility of cast members. You feel the joy of these men.

As Ice, Benin Trotter's hilarious pseudo-masturbation monologue in the second act is one of the high points of the show, as is his bug-eyed, "dope fiendish" gaze early in the play.



The message of "Short Eyes" touches on all aspects of society, and at times the subject matter causes the characters to erupt in violence.

Cooperation and individual talent make this production powerful. Even the seemingly boring character, Javier, is portrayed by Jeff Salazar with just the right amount of slow, drug-blown timidity, making one wonder how this prisoner had it in him to commit a crime.

When things get intolerable, Javier hides under the table. In contrast, Enrique Arias, playing Paco, brings penetrating intensity to his role as an aggressive, homosexual.

However, the dialogue makes some awkward demands on the character of Clark Davis, a white prisoner accused of child molesting, or "short eyes" in prison slang. Davis, played by Rich Gray, is thrown into a cell with an established group of inmates, mostly black and Puerto Rican, whose norms he cannot comprehend.

But Gray overcomes his character's obstacles with decent acting. He brings tremendous refinement and excellent cadences to the lines, allowing us to glimpse a creep's need to be loved, his nervous compulsiveness and his "what about me" self pity.

In a pivotal scene, "Short Eyes" cleans out his conscience and his karima, while Juan, played by Chris Cuthrell, cleans the floor and listens. The parallelism makes for a believable reminiscence, with

Gray actually becoming the self-centered, wimpy Clark who asks for understanding but cannot comprehend the real suffering of his child victims.

As Juan listens, he gives an arrogant tilt to his chin, clenching his teeth and twitching his jaw. With tight-fisted restraint, he holds back his rage when he learns that some of the victims were Puerto Rican. You know that in spite of his revulsion, Juan recognizes Clark's humanity behind his despicable acts.

Daniel Corona plays the radical Black Muslim, El Raheem, a philosophical, revolutionary who adds a political dimension to the action. Wearing a red beret, he tells his "brothers" to do because "try is a failure." He becomes a victim of his own anger and frustration when he comments that, for whites, justice means "just us." Carlton Miller brings a big, honest strength to the character of Omar. You don't know him but you know you could.

The cruelest men in the play are two whites. Nett, the guard, uses his power in arbitrary ways, never offending the inmates. You can't like Jim Sofra in the role, but you can respect him for his uneasy efforts to be cool.

Chris Pinto, as Longshoe, is the only other white prisoner in

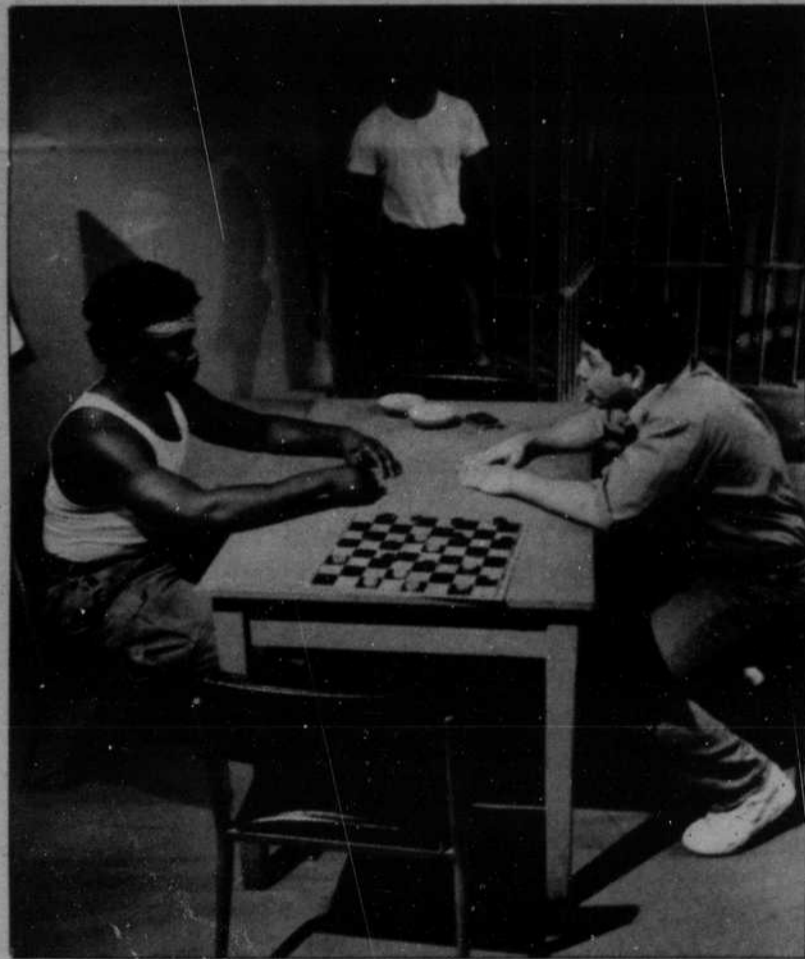
the cellblock. He doesn't exactly have it easy but he knows how to get by. "Longshoe" is slang for someone who is hip and has his act together. But it isn't quite true in this case. The character would be a lot more powerful if he were meaner. He's not quite "bad" enough or stupid enough to do what he does.

Whether or not Kuntz succeeded in making things as ugly as possible, the play as a whole is ugly enough for all normal purposes. You come away believing you know what would happen to a mixed-up "baby rapist" thrown in with eight hardened men. You know that deeply human values would be sustained under the most brutal conditions.

There was only one really noticeable directing error. At the end of the second act, during the chaos of hyperviolence, it's difficult to see around the fighting. This ruckus completely overrides Cupcakes' crucial line. "Is this really us?"

"Short Eyes" continues its run Thursday through Saturday, Jan. 30-31 and Feb. 1. Showtime is 8 p.m. at the University's Arena Theater in Villard Hall. Tickets are \$2.50 for general admission, and are available at the Robinson Theatre box office.

Review by Barbara Shaw
Photos by Ross Martin




Daniel Corona as "El Raheem" and Chris Pinto as "Longshoe" are prison cell mates in the realistic play "Short Eyes."

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